THE EXHAUSTION OF WESTERN ART MUSIC

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> "All American composers, at some relatively early point in their professional careers, come to the realization that they have committed their lives and aspirations to a métier which offers absolutely no chance of appropriate financial rewards, little chance of public recognition and the high probability of some form of abuse or rejection. . ."
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> Lester Trimble, "The Unsung American Composer," *New York Times Magazine*, Nov. 29, 1981

> "Anyone who lived through the long decades of downright ornery complexity when composers outdid one another in inventing new ways to confuse performers and confound listeners, may feel now like the diner who asks for a bit of dessert and has an entire pie slapped in his face. You wanted simple? You got simple."
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> —Donal Henahan, "The Going-Nowhere Music—And Where It Came From," *New York Times* Arts and Leisure section, Dec. 6, 1981

I. The Final Irony

Exactly one week after Lester Trimble publishes an eloquent lamentation on the state of the unloved, unplayed, unpaid, and misunderstood American composer, *Times* chief music critic Donal Henahan comes up with one of his very choicest pieces of vitriol, directed at. . . guess who? The irony is so pointed that I'm loath to dismiss it as an accident. I'd rather think that the editors of the *Times* aren't above indulging in a little mischief now and then.

The Trimble article appears to be well documented. Statistics compiled by the American Symphony Orchestra League, ASCAP, and BMI are cited in support of the assertion that American composers are ignored by their countrymen to an extent unsurpassed by any other group of artists in any Western society. The statistics are certainly clear on one point: American symphony orchestras very seldom play American music. Although Trimble supplies no hard figures on chamber music, he implies that American chamber music suffers a similar fate at the hands of our best touring and recording artists. All right. I grant him both points. In fact, as a composer, I'm tempted to ask, "This is news?" To whom is this clamor for attention being addressed? Trimble fails to show that the situation for the other performing arts, here or abroad, isn't comparably bad, and this has me confused. If he were addressing those of his countrymen who fail to appreciate how hard it is to be a composer in America, as opposed to being a composer in Germany, or a choreographer anywhere, then I would at least expect him to trot out a few devastating statistics from Europe. Isn't the whole point to convince provincial American skeptics, who probably assume that things are tough all over, that American composers are a special hardship case?

But it's not my intention to poke holes in Trimble's argument. I haven't even granted him the courtesy of an extended quote. I may even agree with his presumption that the lot of the American composer is a peculiarly hard one. Why, then, has the article so infuriated me? Is it only because the line of argument needs to be bolstered with a few corroborating statistics from the European counterpart of ASCAP? That certainly doesn't explain why the article strikes me as pathetic. Pathetic? Am I indulging in professional self-hate? If only in the cause of self-therapy, I press on: The sketchiness of the argument leads me to suspect that the article was aimed at individuals already in possession of the basic facts of life concerning high culture in the U.S.—those who, moreover, while not themselves composers or musicians, are in a position to help composers, i.e., orchestra managers, agents, critics, record producers, advertising and media executives, etc. But these are the very people who have consigned serious American music to the periphery of our culture for going on one hundred years. They have done it with certain knowledge that that was precisely what they were doing, and they have done it with the cooperation of the listening public. How does Trimble propose to change anyone's mind? In our media-shrunken world, is cultural nationalism in need of no fresh justi-

fication or defense other than "Everybody else takes care of their own, so why shouldn't we?"

The article is graced by flattering pictures of composers Ralph Shapey, Otto Luening, and Elliott Carter. The point is made repeatedly that there are dozens, if not hundreds, of brilliant men and women who have devoted their lives to the composition of new symphonic and chamber music. The assumption underlying Trimble's argument becomes clear as one frustrating case history follows upon another in endless procession: It's not fair that so many brilliant men and women who work so hard in what was originally a public art form should be so ignored. The argument is not so much an incitement to cultural jingoism as it is an appeal to the good old American sense of fair play. But I wonder, are we so sure that these hardworking, skilled American composers are so different from the hardworking artisans of the early nineteenth century, whose professions were rendered obsolete by the application of steam power to manufacturing? Is the situation of my father, who tried to open a corner drugstore in the face of impossible competition from huge chain stores, any less poignant than that of a composer who spends three years working on an uncommissioned orchestra piece which in all likelihood will go unplayed? It's not only Western technological society, but Nature itself, which deals harshly with those who refuse to or are incapable of adapting to changing circumstances. This is not to say that a pharmacist who wants to offer personal, humane service should or will perish. He won't, because humane medical service is a universal need, which any civilized society will strive to satisfy. But the format such service takes is specific to a time and place. Norman Rockwell doesn't apply to suburban America in 1983. Fortunately, my father adapted to life in hospital pharmacies and suburban mega-stores —not without difficulty, but without sacrificing his ideals. But who would have subsidized him if he had persisted in his dream of owning a mom-and-pop store? I'll refrain from belaboring the obvious.

The need to sing, to dance, to think, to laugh, to cry, to play act— these are universal and constant. The need to sit in a large room and listen to someone play on the violin, or on the Synclavier, a sonic construction which can only be understood with reference to the entire

history of Western art music—this is culture-specific. The evidence cited by Trimble leads me to ask whether this latter activity grows out of late twentieth-century American culture, or whether it is imposed upon it. Further, Trimble's article leads me to ask whether my first question hasn't been answered already, in spades. Our composer-apologist begs these questions, but steers clear of them, preferring to rely on the sentimental lure of the fairness doctrine.

At this point I should reiterate my disclaimer: I really haven't singled out Trimble's article because its arguments are specious or half-formed. On the contrary, it captures eloquently a sentiment which I shared until recently and which I believe the majority of American composers still do share. The only reason we don't hear this lament more often in public is that most composers are (justifiably) wary of sounding like cry-babies. And I, in turn, am sensitive to the charge of slapping around a cry-baby in order to shut him up. We all know how bad that looks in the supermarket. Hence, the repeated disclaimers. I suspect that it's at least as easy for the reader to poke holes in my critique as it is for me to take exception to Trimble's lament. But luckily, before I had a chance to revise my original letter to the *Times*, . . .

Donal Henahan's broadside against minimal music, in particular, and the profession of composing, in general, stopped me dead in my critical tracks. Here we had a destructive, know-nothing attack on new music which, considering the influential readership of the *Times*, could only serve to make it even more difficult for beleaguered composers to find an audience. Rather than pick bones with a distinguished fellow composer, it seemed that I should be manning the barricades. (I am, after all, a child of the 60's.) But, once again (dumb luck), procrastination got the better of valor. I ended up rereading Henahan's nasty little piece over a beer and filing it for future reference. It was only several weeks and several rereadings later that I began to wonder why Henahan's epistles give me such a pleasant kick. It's not as if there are any surprises to be had. Do I derive some perverse pleasure from seeing my colleagues flogged in this "newspaper of record"? Or is it rather that I enjoy seeing my competitors dismissed as irrelevancies? No, no—no on both counts. Perhaps I just enjoy feeling superior to this latterday Eduard

Hanslick. No, it's not even that. I'm afraid it's time to admit that I enjoy Henahan for the same reason I enjoy syndicated film critic Rex Reed: It's because there's a moral fervor about his writing, a veritable passion which informs even his stupidest opinions with a faint glimmer of truth. It's a fervor I've lately come to associate with tabloid headlines, Moral Majority ads, and Madison Avenue sermons, but not with public discussions of music. Most critics who aren't apologists for new music (i.e., composers themselves) seem to have given up on the stuff, being content nowadays merely to describe premieres in fairly neutral language, with only an occasional barb half-buried in the reportage to indicate their true feelings. Henahan, in stark and occasionally embarrassing contrast, has remained livid and indignant for well over a decade. Assume for the sake of argument that he is neither demented nor a fool. I wonder how he's managed to keep his hackles up over this subject for so long. It's not as if there are no alternatives. We all know that the ultimate affront in contemporary America is to be ignored. He could have ignored us, exactly the way the conductors of the Big Five orchestras do. There are plenty of stringers to handle the new music. Moreover, just how long can one remain angry with an incompetent for failing to live up to expectations? Eventually one recognizes incompetence for what it is and expends one's emotional and intellectual energy on more rewarding subjects. But, in fact, I don't remember Henahan ever ranting about incompetent composers.... So we're still in search of a motive. ...Caramba! Can it be? Is it possible that Henahan's feelings are hurt? That just might explain over ten years of poison penmanship. He must believe that composers could, if they wished, write music—truly new music, not warmed-up leftovers—which would delight him. But they haven't. The question is why, oh why, do composers collectively torture this man? If I were Henahan, and I saw that obviously talented composers were working hard to produce music which they knew I would hate, when I believed that they could, if they wished, write music I would love, then I would be hopping mad, too. We Americans cherish the notion of our fundamental, individual innocence. What, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, did Henahan do to deserve decades of unremitting aesthetic torment? Even Eduard Hanslick had his Brahms.

For once, procrastination has worked to my advantage. I've finally glimpsed the real, more flabbergasting irony implicit in the *Times'*

curious juxtaposition of Trimble and Henahan: Both men are motivated by a similar concern for fair play, and both base their arguments on the same critical, unexamined premise. They assume that competent musicians could, if they so willed (and Trimble would add, do), produce music which can be understood and enjoyed solely on its own terms, i.e., without reference to allied activities such as telling a story, dancing, celebrating a rite of passage, etc., but only with reference to its own structure and its place in the history of Western art music. My feelings concerning the sacred cow of fairness are probably clear by now, though somewhat "beyond the range of this article," as they say. As for the question of whether absolute music can or ought to be written in late twentieth-century America, I shall begin by asserting that it's manifestly irresponsible, considering the number of composers who are literally ignored to aesthetic death, to duck this issue or to dismiss it as too basic, too personal, or a moot point. My own observation and analysis lead me to conclude that, if one thinks of music as a social activity, it is not possible to create new absolute music in America at this time. I hasten to add that this does not mean we should all become computer salesmen.

By characterizing music as a social art, I mean nothing less than the following: Until willfully structured sounds are played by someone and enjoyed—as a structure—by someone else, there is no music. There is only mathematics, assemblage, cryptography, tooting, scratching, and banging, however elegant. The latter can all be steps toward music, but aren't in themselves music. Equating an unplayed score with music is nothing other than the composer's peculiar variation of intellectual and aesthetic onanism. As useful as masturbation may be for releasing tension, it's not generally the erotic activity of choice for mature adults when more pleasant alternatives exist. If music is ever again to live up to its potential as a social art, then it is none other than the listener to whom we must turn for a useful perspective. It doesn't necessarily follow that composers should spend their time second-guessing a hypothetical audience. In fact, there's no need to second-guess. One need only observe that the same people who read Donald Barthelme and watch Jean-Luc Godard tend to consider one or another wave of rock'n'roll to be the musical avant-garde. It's delusory for composers to assume that the audience of educated laymen and nonmusical artists is any more

the dupe of media and merchandising moguls in its musical taste than it is in its preference for certain filmmakers, novelists, and painters. The admirers of Fellini, Saul Bellow, and Frank Stella have, with their general disinterest in new concert music, rendered a verdict which I shall take the liberty of interpreting as follows: "We do not have the perceptual skills to understand or enjoy the complexities you formerly proffered, nor the innocence to tolerate the simplicities which you currently propose, nor the perspective to comprehend the significance of your apparent inability to charm us with any of the techniques at your disposal. . . . So don't be surprised if we turn our attention elsewhere." I differ with both Trimble and Henahan in that I don't insist upon blaming anyone for this state of affairs. I don't believe that the nation is populated by philistines who refuse to give hardworking geniuses their due. Neither do I believe that an entire profession has willfully tormented the listening public with music contrived to baffle and frustrate. As an alternative, I propose that our situation be understood historically, as the culmination of trillions of minute events in the lives of millions of people who've listened to and made music over a period of centuries. No one is to blame for the fact that no individual, however brilliant or dedicated, is equal to the task of reinventing music in each new piece. It's time to smash the icon of composer-as-culture-hero. Caesar could lead an army, or Szell an orchestra, but neither could conjure up a body of skilled, willing collaborators from thin air. In a similar sense, composers are incapable of generating their audiences. It's much more useful to think of audiences generating composers. The "next Beethoven," were he to appear in New York this year, could no more lead the way to a new stylistic consensus than the first Beethoven could have single-handedly invented the piano sonata had he been born a serf in the Middle Ages. We have a tendency to give excessively generous credit to a relative few, often to the detriment of the poor shlumps who labor anonymously to create the necessary context for heroism. It's easy to forget who comes first, and who will continue to exist in the absence of the other. An audience without composers? It's easy enough to picture—just look around! But a composer without an audience? Although some would like to think it's possible (who cares if you listen?—Ives didn't!), I can't agree. This perversion of rugged individualism strikes me as the last word in neurotic defensiveness and social irresponsibility, a veritable confession of aesthetic bankruptcy.

II. Our Place in History

We are neither the slaves of history nor its masters. The truth lies somewhere in between. Most of my composer colleagues are subtle enough to understand how this maxim applies to political and economic history, but they fail or refuse to admit its applicability to the arts. I suspect, in fact, that many individuals become artists precisely because, having perhaps too acute a sensitivity to the intractability of our economic and political problems, they believe the arts to be the only field of endeavor which offers a would-be hero even the slimmest chance of becoming an undisputed master (benevolent, of course), a rule-maker in an unearthly world of no-compromise-necessary.

As if the susceptibility of individuals to moral power trips weren't bad enough, university composition departments nurture this neo-Platonic, philosopher-king-of-the-arts fantasy as a professional ideal. How does one reconcile J.S. Bach's radically utilitarian view of music with the hermetic gamesmanship of our new concert music? Is our vision so narrow that we assume, like dogmatic religionists of every stripe, that our currently held view of the faith is the closest approximation to the truth ever achieved, and that all prior versions of the creed have merely been rungs on the ladder of ideological evolution? In short, what arrogance allows us to assume that music can be understood solely on its own terms, except under very specific, rarefied circumstances? Very few of our illustrious predecessors made that assumption, not Bach, the Beatles, Duke Ellington, the Florentine Camerata, nor the earliest practitioners of Gregorian chant. I, personally, am no longer willing to assume that Bach would have preferred, if only his contemporaries would have let him, to think of himself and his work without reference to the Lutheran church service, to the entertainment of aristocrats, or to the training of keyboard players.

Absolute, nonprogrammatic music was delivered to America from Europe as a ready-made. Perhaps that explains the ease with which we forget just how recent and limited an ideal it is. The arts flourished quite nicely without it. Its emergence roughly coincided with the emergence, between 1750 and 1825, of concerts as a popular bourgeois (i.e., specifi-

cally urban) form of entertainment. A rapidly expanding middle class, of course, is directly traceable to the beginnings of industrial capitalism. . . . Now, this is not a Marxist critique, so all you rabid neoconservatives out there can stop formulating your rebuttal for the time being. An expanding middle-class audience was not, in and of itself, sufficient to explain why concerts, and the type of music played at concerts, flourished in Central Europe from the late eighteenth century until the outbreak of World War I. It was, however, one necessary component in a complex, uncontrollable convergence of mass cultural and economic forces: Instruments had developed technically—first strings, during the Renaissance, and then winds and keyboards, during the earliest days of the Industrial Revolution—to the point where purely instrumental music not only equalled but surpassed the human voice in agility, pitch projection, and overall usefulness in ensembles. This had the effect of freeing music from its interdependent relationship with text. The tonal and rhythmic idiom of European music developed to the point where it was capable of articulating tension and release over spans of five, ten, or even twenty minutes. This occurred just when the aforementioned expanding middle-class audience was demanding ever more spectacular evening-length entertainments. The craft of music was, metaphorically, in the right place at the right time, with its recently matured articulative power ready to satisfy an expanding social need.

The key undefined concept in my little historical sketch is "tonal and rhythmic idiom of European music." Indeed, a realistic understanding of the nature of cultural idioms is the key to understanding not only why absolute music flourished for a time, but also why it has failed to become an important component of the creative arts in America. Idioms are efficient communicative processes which arise in a language by consensus, by the unforeseeable, unwitting agreement of the users of that language. Idioms are, in fact, those meaningful "real-time" processes whose comprehension defines linguistic competence. No one ever became fluent in a foreign language merely by mastering those clumsy attempts to rationalize idioms which we call "grammars." Mozart's audience, and Mozart himself, weren't in a position to understand the potential inherent in that singular arrangement of idioms known collectively as the sonata process because of any rational effort on their parts.

They found themselves in that enviable position because for approximately one thousand years prior to 1750, Europeans had been making music in order to worship a deity, recount tales of love and war, celebrate weddings, and lull their babies to sleep. The musical idioms which satisfied these non-musical needs had evolved slowly, in fits and starts, in diverse manners from region to region, but eventually they worked their way into the collective "ear" of an entire continent.

Absolute music by its very nature contains the seeds of its own destruction. Prior to 1750, the stylistic evolution of music had been fairly slow. During the roughly ten generations from Machaut to Palestrina, European choral polyphony and instrumental dance music changed gradually, in minute stylistic increments. Of course, the impracticality of long-distance travel and communication prior to the industrialization of Europe is a major reason why change had to be measured in generations rather than in months or years. But there is another explanation, at least as important, for relative stability in musical practice: Musical style can be constrained by the extramusical function which music serves. Gravity and the fact that we have two legs limits the useful forms of dance music. The physical limitations of the voice and the desire to communicate a text have been the primary constraints faced by songwriters from the trouveres through Lennon and McCartney. Conservative institutions such as the Church have forced musicians to reiterate the familiar rather than experiment with new procedures. In contrast, when music began to be appreciated by large audiences as an entertainment in its own right, the pace of stylistic evolution accelerated precipitously. Barely six generations separate "The Magic Flute" from "The Rite of Spring." Up to about the First World War, the concert-going audience of bourgeois philistines proved to be amazingly flexible. The concert hall in Europe from 1800 to 1913 was a veritable experimental laboratory, a hothouse where music was allowed to develop free from any constraints save its own internal logic. The result, it seems trite to reiterate, was an explosive growth in tonal complexity, accompanied by formal and orchestrational giantism, leading ultimately to the collapse of the system. That's hardly news. What is generally overlooked, however, is the crucial coincidence of the collapse of the tonal system with the emergence of the recording and broadcast industries.

The audience for which nineteenth-century symphonic and chamber music was written was still primarily an audience of musical doers, of amateur players and singers. If one wanted to hear music in 1850, one generally had to make music. The concert hall, for all its wonders, was merely the rarefied tip of the music-making iceberg. Anyone who has learned to ride a bicycle knows that the knowledge gained by doing is radically different from, and, in some sense, deeper than, knowledge acquired through observation. Someone who's never laid hands on a brush cannot see a painting in the same way as one who has attempted, however clumsily, to do a landscape or self-portrait. The importance of the evolution in both Europe and America from an audience of music-starved amateurs to an audience of super-satiated, ear-glutted record collectors and radio listeners cannot be overemphasized. The contemporary American concert audience has an incredibly broad but shallow understanding of musical processes. The audience for which our standard repertoire of absolute music was written possessed a far deeper, but more narrowly focused, knowledge. The tragic irony of art music in the last seventy-five years is that, just as the audience's perceptual skills have deteriorated, the demands placed upon them by composers have increased dramatically. Most composers are justifiably enthralled by the musical achievements of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries—and by the glory which accrued to its creators. Composers from Schoenberg on have stopped at nothing, not even the supreme exertion of reinventing music from scratch, to keep the delicate blossom of absolute music alive. But an idiom cannot be invented by an individual or clique. The listener now has the incredible burden of understanding every new piece as a law unto itself. The only way to do this is to combine an intimate familiarity with all of the procedures of all of the art musics of the world with a devil-may-care willingness to throw all or part of that knowledge overboard when the piece at hand makes known the context in which it wishes to be understood. Does anyone doubt that this is an extremely rare talent? Does anyone assume that this is what Beethoven expected of his audience? In the face of honest answers to these questions, how can an American composer of concert music in 1983 pretend to be carrying on in the spirit of the eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early twentieth-century "masters"? The context for creating a masterpiece of absolute music does not exist.

III. The Future Is Bright

The presentation of new concert pieces will continue as a minor sideshow within a much larger, more vital, and exciting curatorial program devoted to preserving the best of the tonal repertoire. (The curatorial program of preserving the nineteenth-century conception of a composer's function is the one which should be dropped.) A handful of exceptionally talented individuals will continue to reinvent music singlehandedly, but they will be ignored, both here and increasingly so in Europe, which will catch up with the U.S. in this regard as surely as it has in the manufacture and sale of bluejeans and the building of superhighways. In the meantime, sound will be produced in unprecedented quantities for use in film, television and radio broadcasts, video, live theatre and dance, for psycho- and physical-therapy, for meditation, for the advancement of political causes, for the selling of products, for the inducement of hypnotic and hallucinatory states, for the purposes of increasing productivity in the office, speeding up traffic flow in the cafeteria, and soothing your nerves in the elevator. To some this will represent a step down. The new "music" will be highly constrained by the extramusical tasks to which it has been "prostituted." It will often be inseparable from associated visual imagery or text. Its content and significance may be inextricably confused with the technology used to produce it. But since it will usually be unrecognizable as that music about whose integrity and survival we've become so very defensive, it will continue to grow freely and unpredictably, like a weed in a vacant lot. Someday, when its common practices are very well established in the collective "ear" of a media-hip society, an astute observer of the cultural scene will notice, probably with a generation or two of hindsight, that sounds are once again being arranged into patterns without reference to anything but themselves, and that this activity is prized by both listeners and composers alike as one of the crowning glories and supreme delights of civilization. And then, I suspect, after a brilliant period of rapidly accelerating innovation and elaboration, this new sonic art-for-art's-sake will collapse of its own weight, as surely as did its predecessor.

The burden of keeping the ideal of music-for-music's-sake alive through cultural thick and thin has proven to be an insuperable albatross for contemporary American composers. It's a shame to see many of the best musical minds in the land mesmerized by this phantom, while the mundane business of reconstituting sonic art by consensus—by putting music back to work, so to speak—is carried on by lesser talents. If writing music has become so hard that our most gifted, hard-working musicians can only manage to turn out a few dozen rather short pieces in a lifetime, then something is seriously amiss. It's as if we can't let go of the image of a lost love—the love of ourselves as culture heroes. We can't reconcile ourselves to the fact that the arts are just as temporal and finite as the societies which spawn them. I can't help but think that our problem is really one of collective immaturity, of a refusal to trust that which we can't explicitly control. We don't seem to be able to face the fact that music will reinvent itself in its own way, in its own time, and that there is nothing an individual can consciously do to hasten the dawn of this millennium. Those of us who can't deal with the spectre of our individual mortality will have to find a different crutch.

IV. Rebuttal and The Last Word

> "But when those first impressions have receded, there remains for our enjoyment some passage whose structure, too new and strange to offer anything but confusion to our mind, had made it indistinguishable and so preserved it intact; and this, which we had passed every day without knowing it, which had held itself in reserve for us, which by the sheer power of its beauty had become invisible and remained unknown, this comes to us last of all. And we shall love it longer than the rest because we have taken longer to get to love it. The time, moreover, that a person requires—as I required in the case of this sonata—to penetrate a work of any depth is merely an epitome, a symbol, one might say, of the years, the centuries even, that must elapse before the public can begin to cherish a masterpiece that is really new. . . .
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> No doubt it is easy to imagine, by an illusion similar to that which makes everything on the horizon appear equidistant, that all the revolutions which have hitherto occurred in painting or in music did at least

> respect certain rules, whereas that which immediately confronts us, be it impressionism, the pursuit of dissonance, an exclusive use of the Chinese scale, cubism, futurism, or what you will, differs outrageously from all that has occurred before. This is because everything that went before we are apt to regard as a whole, forgetting that a long process of assimilation has converted it into a substance that is varied of course but, taken as a whole, homogeneous, in which Hugo is juxtaposed with Moliere."
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> Marcel Proust, *A l'ombre des jeunes fillles en fleurs*[1]

A worthy opponent, Proust. But the truth is to be found neither in Proust alone, nor only in the principal theses of this essay. Nor in this case is it to be found "Somewhere in between." One ought instead to savor the undiluted strength of each perspective separately, to better treat the constantly changing symptoms of a fevered imagination. Remember, though, to always have the opposing view close at hand, as an antidote. An overdose of Proust can be fatal. Keep this essay in your medicine cabinet.

Oct. 28, 1982
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[1]Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, Vol 1, translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Random House, 1981), pp. 571-573.